

Written Statement
Congressman Greg Walden
Senate Committee on Agriculture, Nutrition and Forestry
Thursday, June 26, 2003

Thank you, Mr. Chairman, I appreciate having the opportunity to submit testimony on the McNinnis-Walden Healthy Forests Restoration Act (HR 1904) and I commend you for holding this hearing an issue not only important to the residents of my congressional district, but an issue that's important to all Americans who are concerned about the health and well-being of our national forestlands.

Mr. Chairman, catastrophic wildfires have increasingly devastated our public lands in recent years. These fires decimate forests, ruin watersheds, destroy critical habitat for species and threaten whole communities with destruction. Last summer more than one million acres were burned by fire in Oregon alone. The Forest Service spent over \$150 million battling the Biscuit Fire. And most tragically, many brave souls lost their lives battling out-of-control infernos.

This year's fire season has already begun. An extreme wildfire in Arizona last week destroyed more than 250 structures and precipitated the evacuation of 450 families near the community of Summer Haven. The possibility of a similar, and perhaps more dire, situation exists in California where officials have established evacuation plans for citizens residing near Los Angeles due to the threat of major wildfire outbreaks. But, as many of the members on this esteemed panel know, the threat of catastrophic wildfire and the crisis facing our forests is not unique to the West.

The dangerous build up of hazardous fuels on forest floors, outbreaks of disease and insect infestation combine to form a truly national problem afflicting every state and region in America. In the South over 57 million acres are at high risk of beetle infestation. During his statement in support of HR 1904, my colleague in the House from Georgia, Congressman Max Burns, noted

In the State of Georgia alone, we have a little over 800,000 acres of Federal forest. Last year, 13,000 acres of those trees were infested and destroyed by the southern pine beetle. H.R. 1904 combats these infestations and assists land managers in reducing the susceptibility of forest ecosystems to severe infestations.

In other regions of the country the situation is equally severe. An insect called the hemlock woolly adelgid is destroying forests throughout the mid-Atlantic and Appalachian regions, while in Michigan the introduction of the emerald ash borer in 2002 has proven to be so devastating (already killing or damaging seven million trees) that in March Governor Granholm formally requested assistance from the Department of Agriculture (USDA) to help combat the spread of the borer to the state's remaining 692 million ash trees.

The national scope of America's forest health crisis demands a national response. That's what is provided by HR 1904, which I co-authored with my colleague in the House, Scott McNinnis and

approved by the House by a vote of 256 to 170. As you know, Mr. Chairman, it's not often that a national environmental issue of this magnitude is approved with such strong, bipartisan support.

While America's forests are different, the problems that afflict them are the same. The biggest culprits are the lack of management by the federal government, illogical rules and laws, endless appeals and lawsuits. Combined they tie the hands of forest managers and prevent projects that would improve forest health, help prevent catastrophic fire and provide better safety for our communities. As the Chief of the Forest Service, Dale Bosworth, has said

"I've got 37 years with the U.S. Forest Service, and over the years I have seen us get to a situation where there are more and more regulatory requirements, and less and less opportunity for professional foresters and biologists to make decisions out in the field. We end up spending more time in windowless rooms behind computer screens doing analysis, and in a lot of cases it doesn't lead to a better decision. We've gotten ourselves to where we just can't get work done on the ground. People expect us to get work done on the ground, and that's what we're here for."

Chief Bosworth aptly terms this "analysis paralysis."

Too often foresters are required to propose as many as six to eight alternatives to simple forest treatment projects under the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA), knowing that most of them will never be utilized. As managers of the federal government's purse strings, we have a duty to ensure that we cease the current trend of shoveling taxpayer dollars at wasteful paperwork while we starve our forests of attention and stymie foresters from implementing their expertise.

While HR 1904 requires that hazardous fuel removal projects must go through the NEPA process, it does not force the Forest Service to draft alternative plans that they know will never be used. It also encourages greater public participation by codifying the bipartisan Western Governors Association 10-Year Strategy's robust public input and participation requirements, ensuring that interested persons will have numerous opportunities to engage decision makers during all phases of a project's development and implementation.

Without expediting forest treatment projects, the outbreak of disease and bug infestation and the build-up of hazardous fuels across our country will only grow worse. Last year taxpayers spent well over \$1.5 billion dollars fighting raging fires, and this year Congress once again increased annual funding for hazardous fuel reduction programs under the National Fire Plan to over \$400 million. As we continue to invest more in fire prevention and forest health programs, it is critical that we match this investment with the tools our foresters need to actively manage the crisis at hand.

After years of attempting various approaches, HR 1904 struck a chord of common sense. It is not only supported by such diverse groups as the National Association of Home Builders, the National Association of Counties and the National Volunteer Fire Council, but it is also

supported by groups representing professional foresters like the Society of American Foresters and the Western Forestry Leadership Council whose members routinely see the deplorable health of our federal forestlands. And, finally Mr. Chairman, I would like to emphasize the bipartisan support that this bill received in the House. Nearly 60% of the members the House from the Pacific Northwest and Midwest to the South and Mid-Atlantic regions supported this bill on final passage.

Thank you, Mr. Chairman for permitting me to submit these remarks today on an issue not only important to the residents of central, southern and eastern Oregon, but an issue that's important to all Americans who are concerned about the health and well-being of our national forestlands.